

R. Krishnan, ed. *Faultlines*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2015. 159 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-51-6.

As a literary tradition, Malaysian literature in English has been growing at a moderate pace since its inception in the late 1940s (Quayum 149). More than seventy years since its genesis in post-war Malaya, the development of this tradition has been rather erratic. In the past decade, however, there has been an emergence of more publishing companies and imprints, and the appearance of a new generation of writers across the country. This recent development has helped give more exposure to English writing in Malaysia and encourage more writers to publish in the language. Although it is too early to measure the impact and determine the longevity of this development on Malaysian writing in English, it is nonetheless significant and encouraging for the local literary scene. One of the new publishing houses catering to this new generation of writers is Silverfish Books. Since its commencement in 2000, Silverfish has played a proactively influential role in the development of local literary activities. Today, it continues to facilitate and promote the growth of contemporary writing in English, with a special focus on the short story. Sixteen years after starting the highly successful *Silverfish New Writing* series and publishing numerous short story collections, Raman Krishnan has thoughtfully selected twenty-four short stories in a new collection called *Faultlines*, in order to showcase new talents in the local writing scene. Some of the stories in this collection deal with fragmented identities, negotiations of cultural space and the search for a sense of belonging. In his introduction to the volume, Krishnan explains that “the best part of reading and editing these stories is about learning something new about us, past and present, and the country’s untold and untellable stories” (9). The works selected are about the new, the undiscovered, the taboo, the Other, the forgotten and the silenced in our society.

Faultlines brings together the works of six emerging women writers: five from Malaysia and one from the Maldives. These are Chin Ai-May, Jenny Ng, Shazwani Abdul Kabur, Shazra Aishath, Tan Yet Mee and Teja Salehuddin Tan. Their works are divided into six different “books” with each book dedicated to a selection of stories from a specific writer. This approach helps to accomplish the main objective of the anthology, which is to make readers privy to the talent of these writers and how they perceive the world around them. Generally, these writers seem to focus on the aspects of greed, hypocrisy and hate in society, or on the more optimistic themes of family and relationships. The stories selected for the collection give insight into the maladies, dilemmas and the diversity of experiences in contemporary Malaysia and the Maldives by engaging the socio-cultural-political concerns of these two countries.

Chin Ai-May's "Faultlines" and Shazra Aishath's "Sounds in the Night" are two stories which focus on the issues of domestic violence and victimisation of women. "Faultlines," the titular story of the anthology, is a vignette depicting a conversation between Clara, a woman whose older son is physically abusive towards her, and her less-than-sympathetic mother. Clara's mother believes that Clara is at fault for her son's violence on her, but despite the abuse Clara continues to be protective of her son and excuses his behaviour. The attitude of the two women reveals the disturbing realisation of how victims of abuse can be so accepting of their situation. This also exposes how an unbroken cycle of domestic abuse has affected and continues to affect subsequent generations of a family. Aishath's story, on the other hand, provides a critique of the social apathy and indifference towards domestic violence. It highlights how a married couple, Shaheeda and Ihusan, react when they are confronted with signs of domestic violence in the house next door. Shaheeda, especially, shows sympathy towards the abused but neither she nor Ihusan intervenes to stop the cycle of violence and help the woman. Instead, Ihusan believes that it is not their responsibility to interfere in the domestic life of other people, and while Shaheeda seems willing to help, she too lets go of the issue in the end. This story reveals the uncomfortable truth of people's nonchalance towards the issue.

However, domestic violence is not the only form of abuse exposed in the collection. Tan Yet Mee's "Shame Girl" is a story of Ah Moi, an intelligent and hardworking girl who has ambitions to further her studies. Some of Ah Moi's cousins have brought shame upon the family due to their shotgun marriages. And while Ah Moi's mother constantly advises her not to fall into the same trap, Ah Moi believes that she also has shamed herself and the family. This shame that Ah Moi feels is the result of sexual abuse perpetrated by a neighbour. The shame associated with this event haunts her throughout her teenage years and damages her trust towards other people. This story reveals the shame surrounding pre-marital sex and unplanned pregnancies in many societies. It also sheds light on the sexual abuse of children and criticises society's problematic view of womanhood.

The marginalisation of people deemed "Other" in society and the bigotry they encounter daily are addressed in Shazwani Abdul Kabur's "Albinism" and Jenny Ng's "Friday Afternoon Specials." "Albinism" is a powerful depiction of the stigma and discrimination people with albinism face on an everyday basis. On a bus ride to Kuala Lumpur, Sally befriends a thirteen-year-old boy named Ahmad who suffers from this condition. Sally is initially quite uncomfortable and suspicious of Ahmad when he offers her some jelly beans. However, she is able to overcome her prejudice as she realises that Ahmad is no different from any other human being. Sally's acquaintance with Ahmad shows the sadness and alienation of people who are different. At the end of the story, Sally stands up

and defends Ahmad from the judgmental gaze of society. Berating a man who has been staring at Ahmad rudely throughout the journey, Sally comments:

Excuse me.... For your information, that boy is not a ghost. He is perfectly normal. He has visions and dreams, and has a bright future. Why don't you stare at other things that could be more useful to your life instead? (41)

Ng's "Friday Afternoon Specials" addresses the issue of gender dysphoria and critiques the indiscriminate prejudice towards the transgender community in Malaysia. The central protagonist of Ng's tale is Tommy, who for most days of the week leads a solitary and private life. Unbeknownst to many people, Tommy identifies himself as a woman. However, social conventions and the fear of shame prevents him from embracing the identity of a woman. Every Friday afternoon is, however, special to him because it is the only time of the week when Tommy allows himself to shed the pretence and become Tamara. Tamara is a much more confident person than Tommy. However, Tamara's story is an optimistic one. Despite the bigotry and threats of violence she receives, Tamara decides to be true to herself and take ownership of her identity. Tamara's struggle with her sense of self is an empowering look at gender identity and the confidence of embracing one's self in a particularly conservative society like Malaysia. Ahmad and Ng's stories show how people overcome their fears and how it empowers them to stand up for themselves and for others who are discriminated against.

The strength of this collection lies in how the writers demonstrate a nuanced understanding of human weaknesses. As the title of the anthology suggests, the stories depict different representations of fragmentation and show intersections of different life experiences. They present the darker side of human nature where hypocrisy and hate exist. These stories also emphasise the disparity between what is seen on the surface and the sadness that lies underneath, and many of these stories tug at your heartstrings. Yet, among the stories that present a bleak look at the human condition, there are some stories that celebrate the wonders of life and the quiet strength that people possess. These latter stories also illustrate the love and compassion inherent within human individuals.

However, one major drawback of this collection is the way some of the stories are fleshed out. While most of the stories are well crafted, not all of them are fully realised. Moreover, while many of the stories are engrossing and enjoyable, some appear out of place in an otherwise cohesive collection. To be fair, the collection never set out to be thematically coherent, and it is also unreasonable to expect that all the stories will be equally well made. Yet, one cannot help but feel a sense of mismatch in some of the stories. In spite of my personal reservation about these, *Faultlines* is on the whole an engaging read

with many eye-opening, confronting and heart-warming stories in it. It is a solid addition to Silverfish's extensive list of publications and I believe that this anthology will become a noteworthy contribution to the fast-growing canon of Malaysian literature in English.

Works Cited

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